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DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PM](#)

SUBJECT: TORRIJOS APPEALS TO PUBLIC FOR CANAL EXPANSION
SUPPORT

REF: PANAMA 866

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) President Torrijos urged the Panamanian people to take advantage of the "unique and possibly irrepeatable" opportunity of the October 22 Canal expansion referendum in his September 1 "state of the nation"- like address. Torrijos called on Panamanians to vote according to what was best for the country, not politics, stating that his support for the expansion project was purely for the benefit of the nation. Torrijos's speech, delivered at the opening of the National Assembly's fall session, detailed a litany of public projects in the education, health, and security sectors, including a new capacity building program to benefit 200,000 people, to be funded by \$55 million in Canal revenues. END SUMMARY.

TORRIJOS: A MAN WITH A PLAN AND A CANAL REFERENDUM

¶2. (U) Torrijos focused overwhelmingly on garnering support for the October 22 Canal referendum. He opened by "congratulating" the National Assembly for its "patriotic" unanimous approval of the law for the Canal expansion vote, a jab at the Panamenista and Molirena parties that have since assumed ambiguous to opposition positions.

¶3. (U) The President spoke at length about the significance of the referendum calling it a decision more important than even a presidential election. The referendum should be seen as "an opportunity for the nation" and "in no way used as a political platform or electoral thermometer" to measure the government's performance, said Torrijos. (Comment: This statement clearly refers to the common belief that voters will vote based on their view of the GOP, not how they feel about the expansion project itself. As the "yes" vote margin dips in polls, the "punishment vote" effect raises concerns for the GOP. End Comment.) Torrijos asserted, "Neither the GOP, the PRD, nor Martin Torrijos is searching for political gains through the Canal expansion."

¶4. (U) Torrijos also appealed to nationalism, stating it was time to show the world that Panamanians were indeed in control of its own Canal, something the nation owed itself after "fighting for 100 years" to "reclaim" the Canal. Torrijos also mentioned the "youth who died" fighting for Panama's control of the Canal, a pointed reference to the

1964 protest at the Canal Administration building during which U.S. forces killed several Panamanian students participating in an attempt to raise a Panamanian flag.

BIG PLANS FOR EDUCATION, HEALTH, SECURITY

15. (U) Besides addressing the merits of Canal expansion, Torrijos detailed various GOP projects in education, health, and security, including:

- a) providing \$600 million in education funds,
- b) granting 23,000 student scholarships,
- c) cleaning the Bay of Panama,
- d) building additional hospitals,
- e) constructing the long-awaited Panama City-Colon highway,
- f) building a potable water plant (Comment: The week before, major news outlets reported a serious lack of potable water in certain communities. End Comment.)
- g) expanding the North and South highways, and
- h) bringing additional police presence to the streets. On September 6, the GOP announced the purchase of 81 new patrol cars.

(Comment: When addressing health issues, Torrijos singled out Cuba's Operacion Milagro for praise and did not mention assistance from any other country, despite the large contingent of diplomatic observers in the gallery. End Comment.) Torrijos's discussion of the various projects fit under his theme of fighting poverty, building trust in government, and leading Panama into the first world. The underlying thrust of Torrijos's message, though, was that the best way to benefit the country and fight poverty was through Canal expansion.

16. (U) One of the most notable projects Torrijos mentioned was the proposal to train 200,000 Panamanians as mechanics, electricians, and other technical workers, using \$55 million in Canal revenue. This capacity building project would be the first program to visibly use Canal earnings to benefit the larger public. The program would begin next year. (Comment: The announcement of this project is aimed at addressing a common criticism voiced by "No" vote groups who claim the Canal's revenues benefit only the rich, not average Panamanians. However, given that this program would begin next year, it remains to be seen whether yet another GOP promise will sway undecided voters to the "Yes" column. As with the GOP's newfound desire to pursue a "National Development Plan," voters may well greet this latest set of promises with a healthy dose of skepticism (Septel). End Comment.)

ASSEMBLY REELECTS CASTILLO AS PRESIDENT

17. (U) Prior to Torrijos's address, the National Assembly elected its new president and two vice-presidents. Incumbent President Elias Castillo (PRD) was reelected, while Susanna Richards de Torrijos (PRD and President Torrijos's aunt) was elected as first vice-president and Jorge Alvarado (PRD) as second vice-president. The opposition parties fielded candidates for all three elections, but there appeared to be little unity among the opposition parties as many opposition legislators voted for PRD candidates. (Comment: The Panamenista and Cambio Democratico parties put women forward as their candidates for National Assembly President. This may be interpreted as an optimistic sign on the participation of women in politics or as the parties' attempt to draw attention in an election where the opposition candidates were unlikely to win given the PRD majority. It was also noteworthy that several legislators, in voicing their support for one of the women candidates, made more mention of her physical beauty than her leadership abilities or other qualifications. End Comment.)

Comment

18. (SBU) From the logistics of the National Assembly elections, where many legislators chose to precede their votes with commentaries in favor or against Canal expansion, to the president's impassioned pleas to the Panamanian people "to do what's right for the country," the event focused heavily on the upcoming referendum. It is too early to tell whether Torrijos's latest call for support for the national (vice partisan) project to expand the Canal, his appeal to patriotism, or newly announced social projects will stem erosion of support for Canal expansion and allow Torrijos to strengthen the "yes" vote. Given that he offered up similar appeals in announcing the project last April (reftel), voters may well discount this latest call as more of the same. The referendum remains the overarching, indeed sole, focus of Torrijos.

ARREAGA